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Eloise thrived on the stresses of travel . . .

THAT LAST JOURNEY

by JACK RITCHIE



“Now be a good boy and don’t pout,” Eloise commanded. “Phone our travel agent and make arrangements for Kuala Lumpur.”

Kuala Lumpur, hell, I thought. Enough is enough. However, I went to the phone and dialed our agent.

By now he recognized my voice. He was curious. “Kuala Lumpur? Why Kuala Lumpur?”

“Some sort of ethnic festival is taking place there next week and my

wife wants to see it. Also, she's never been to the city before, which is challenge enough in itself."

When I hung up, I stalked upstairs to my stationary exercise bicycle. I am a firm believer in regular restrained exercise, though not necessarily out of doors.

As I pedaled, I again went over my plan to dispose of Eloise.

Lord, how I hate traveling.

One is in a continual fret about plane reservations, train departures, and the comings and goings of buses and ferry boats. One spends miserable hours waiting in dismal foreign depots acquiring headaches if one dares to read under the always inadequate lighting.

One is forever the captive of anxiety. Where can one get one's money exchanged for the local currency? What are the official rates? How much better could one do on the black market? Is it worth the risk? Where will one eat today? What mysterious and usually nasty food will be served?

And there is the constant struggle to make oneself understood in illogical languages and impossible dialects. One must also worry about the water and one's laundry. When will it be done—if at all? Will it be returned or will it inexplicably disappear? And, perhaps worst of all, one is always aware that, as a tourist, one is fair game for anyone.

Yet Eloise thrives on these very stresses and has done so all her life. She regards them as adventure and she considers her spacious and quite comfortable American home as merely a place where one stops now and then to check up on the servants, collect the mail, and plan new travels. During the four years we have been married, we have averaged less than two months per year at home.

I am Eloise's fourth husband.

Her first was Abner, four years her junior. He died at the age of twenty-nine in Monaco when his sports car failed to negotiate a hairpin turn and crashed into a wine shop.

Eloise was eight years older than her second husband, Charles; forty to his thirty-two. Charles, a non-swimmer and a heavy drinker, met his death in Singapore. He apparently fell off the dark end of a pier during a yacht-club party.

Then Manfred. Eloise was fifty-two, Manfred forty. He died in the Carpathian Mountains. An avid collector of fungi, he was also a connois-

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seur of wild mushroom soup and had eaten it once too often.

During our courtship, I once rather delicately inquired of Eloise her viewpoint on age differences between spouses. She replied that years meant nothing to her, one was as young as one felt—with which I hastily concurred.

I had, of course, been fully aware of Eloise's penchant for gadding about the globe before I married her. However, in that spirit of optimism and reform in which one enters a new marriage, I had confidently felt that I could change her.

I had been wrong.

But travel so exhausts me mentally, emotionally, and physically that I finally came to the reluctant conclusion that something drastic had to be done. The situation simply could not be allowed to go on until I collapsed into an untimely death on some foreign field.

A divorce was out of the question. Initiating any such action on my part would probably result in my walking away penniless—something I quite dreaded.

No. There remained only one solution. Eloise had to take that last journey, and the sooner the better.

I had, at first, considered hiring a professional murderer while we were abroad. However, there remained the language difficulty. I couldn't picture myself seeking out a killer or discussing with him the fine points of murder in pidgin English.

I weighed seeking professional help here in the States. But where could I find it? One simply does not go about asking people if they know of a killer who is available. Even having found one, there still lurked in the background the later possibility of being blackmailed.

No, if one wants something done—even murder—one must do it oneself.

How would I dispose of Eloise? I would have preferred something basically non-violent—poisoning perhaps. However, poisoning immediately suggests an inside job, and I preferred to direct as much suspicion from my own person as possible.

No, I would have to arrange Eloise's death so that the blame pointed to that much-maligned individual, the intruder.

Should I smother her with a pillow?

I am in the best of health and reasonably strong, but I have a trick elbow. Suppose that during the smothering process it should suddenly

slip out of joint again? It could prove most embarrassing and I doubted if I could smother Eloise with just one hand.

Shoot her? No. The police are frightfully clever about powder grains and that sort of thing. Even taking the precaution of wearing gloves might not prove sufficient. Besides, the report of the weapon would more than likely be heard by the servants and a time for the murder established, and I, for one, preferred to give the police as little help as possible.

No, Eloise must meet her death silently, and that suggested some kind of a cudgel—a blunt instrument, if you will—an instrument suggestive and characteristic of the intruder.

He would creep into Eloise's room, intent upon rifling her dressing table, when Eloise would awaken. She would be about to raise the alarm. Instead of just wisely fleeing, he would panic, grab the nearest weapon, and kill her. While all of this was happening I would be fast asleep in my own bedroom, of course.

Yes, my *own* bedroom. Frankly, I don't believe Eloise ever really wanted a fourth husband. She simply needed a traveling companion—one who would take care of the petty details and see to it that no trains, planes, or buses were missed.

I would murder Eloise tonight. There was no point in putting it off any longer. The arrangements for Kuala Lumpur might come through at any moment and the opportunity would be lost.

I went about implementing my decision by driving to the nearest shopping center, where I bought a pair of rubber gloves, a flashlight, and some batteries. In one of the shoe stores in the complex I purchased a pair of shoes three sizes too large for me, explaining to the totally disinterested clerk that they were a present for a friend.

That evening I retired to my bedroom at ten-thirty as usual, but now I remained awake. At one-thirty I fortified myself with one brandy. Two, I knew, would make me ill.

I slipped into the oversized shoes and tied the laces as tightly as I could. I put on the rubber gloves, pocketed the flashlight, and crept silently down the hall to Eloise's bedroom.

At her door, I listened. Yes, she was asleep. Eloise did not exactly snore, but she was certainly an emphatic breather.

I turned the knob and stepped into the room. There was just enough moonlight so that I could make my way about the room without having to switch on the flashlight.

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I removed the poker from its fireplace stand and returned to Eloise's bed. I sighed. The deed must be done firmly and without hesitation. I raised the poker and struck as hard as I could. Once. Twice. I then turned away from the bed and let the poker drop to the floor.

I now turned on the flashlight and went to Eloise's vanity table. I found her plush jewelry case and slipped it into my pocket. Next I scattered items about so that it appeared as though someone had been rifling the drawers.

I went to the French windows and opened one of them fully until it stuck in that position. I stepped out onto the balcony, proceeded down its length, and took the stairs to the rear terrace. I made my way to the gardener's shed, where I had previously ascertained that I would find a fifty-pound bag of fertilizer.

I shouldered the bag and walked down toward the flower gardens. As I neared them, I began running—or at least accelerated to a reasonable lope. I stepped into the soft soil of the tulip beds and when I reached sod again I stopped and lowered the bag.

Though I am in rather good condition, I was breathing heavily and it took some minutes before I recovered sufficiently enough to continue.

I used the flashlight sparingly to locate the marble fawn just beyond the flower beds. I opened Eloise's jewelry case and strewed its contents on the grass just beyond the fawn, then tossed the case after the jewelry.

Then I sharply rapped the head of the flashlight on a nearby stone bench until the lens and the bulb shattered and the flashlight went out. I left it lying there and carried the bag of fertilizer back to the gardener's shed.

When I returned to the house, I chucked the shoes and the rubber gloves in the basement incinerator. I went back upstairs to my bedroom, undressed, and eventually succeeded in going to sleep.

In the morning I was awakened by frantic knocking at my door. It was one of the maids. She had discovered Eloise's body.

I immediately phoned the police.

When they arrived—eventually in adequate numbers—they began questioning me and doing their best to reconstruct the crime.

After a while, a Lieutenant Randall joined me in the library to tell me what he thought had happened.

"We figure it was a burglar. He sneaked into the room and he was

going through your wife's dressing table when she woke. He must have panicked and picked up the nearest thing—which happened to be the poker—and killed her."

I remained properly stunned.

"He grabbed your wife's jewelry case and ran down the terrace to the garden. We found his footprints in one of the flower beds down there. He was a man of about your height."

"Oh," I said. "Did someone see him?"

"No. We deduced that from his footprints when we measured the strides."

I nodded. "About my height and weight?"

"Your height, yes. Weight, no. We can tell that from the depth of the footprints. He was a pretty heavy man. Maybe even fat."

I remained impressed.

"We found jewelry and a jewelry case just beyond a marble fawn out there. We think that he was running, and that's something you shouldn't do at night on strange ground, even if you got a flashlight. He tripped over the fawn and the jewelry scattered all over the place. He didn't want to spend any time groping for it in the dark, so he just picked himself up and kept running."

"Groping in the dark? Didn't you say he had a flashlight?"

"It wasn't his lucky night. When he fell, the flashlight flew out of his hand and smashed itself on a stone bench."

Randall seemed rather pleased with himself. "We've collected all the jewelry we could find. Could you look it over and tell us if anything is missing?"

"I really wouldn't know. However, it doesn't make any difference. It was Eloise's traveling jewelry. All paste, or whatever they make imitations out of these days. She kept the originals in a safety-deposit box in her bank."

From his attitude, I gathered that Randall had never considered me a prime suspect, even from the beginning. Perhaps he didn't think me capable of brutal murder or violent action.

However, he was still curious about some things. "You and your wife had separate bedrooms?"

Perhaps I flushed a bit. "Yes."

"How long were you married?"

"Nearly four years."

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"How old was she?"

"Sixty-one."

Then came the inevitable question. "And how old are you, sir?"

I beamed proudly. "Seventy-four. But I take good care of myself. My father died at a hundred and one, my mother at ninety-eight."

Yes, I come from a long-lived family and I still have a good many years ahead, but not one day of them will be spent in Djibouti, Karachi, or Kuala Lumpur.

When the police left, I got into my slippers and found a comfortable chair beside the library fireplace. I opened a good book.

Ah, now *this* was the way to travel!



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